When the Unthinkable Happens:

Being Prepared for a Real-World Search and Rescue

By LCdr. Jim Laingen

We were several hundred miles off the coast of Sri Lanka and enjoying the transit home from our Western Pacific deployment. Then, after 99 miserable days in Arabian Gulf, our air wing suffered a sudden and tragic loss. An F-14D and its crew disappeared after a routine, night-air-intercept control (AIC) event, and an exhaustive search and rescue effort began.

For the next 20 hours, our air wing conducted a frantic search for our lost shipmates. The search extended more than 70 miles away from the carrier. Although our efforts were in vain, they highlighted many important lessons. My perspective is that of an E-2C airborne mission commander, but the lessons can be transferred to any platform.

You never know when disaster will strike, so you need to be ready. But being ready is easy to say—actually "being ready" is more difficult. Primarily, it takes a solid preflight plan, a well-thought-out scenario, and a thorough brief. You probably won't be able to cover every scenario and shouldn't try. Addressing general "what ifs" and how you would handle them will go a long way to make that quick, flexible reaction that could save the day. Study not only your platform's capabilities but those of other units in the battle group: ships, aircraft, radios, and datalinks. You won't know what you'll need until you need it. Have the necessary materials at all times. In a prolonged SAR effort, you may require extra paper to log the facts, frequencies for other units in the battle group, preprinted search plans, or the proper TacAid in your "blue brains".

Next, stay alert. The E-2C controlled the AIC before the plane was lost. A "knock it off" was called, and the Hawkeye crew cleared the fighters to switch frequencies on their way home. Soon after, the F-14's wingman called and asked if our Hummer crew had talked with the fighter—they had not, and the search began for the missing aircraft. It happened suddenly; no one had seen the plane go down. Using last known information from another fighter and radar tapes from nearby ships, a rough location was determined for the fighter's last location.

There are three other keys to being ready: keep track of your wingman and aircraft under your control, know the check-in and check-out procedures, and know the area weather.

Start a log. This can be invaluable for helping with the passdown to the next guy in the search, and it will help you recall important details. The mishap board will reconstruct the event. In multi-crew aircraft like the Hawkeye, don't be limited to one log-keeper. Your logs become privileged material for the mishap board. We used logs from every crewman on our six continuous sorties to build a detailed timeline of the search effort.

Use your systems. When we launched, our aircraft was the second E-2C on station. We had a few details of the initial search plan but nothing concrete. With a proper passdown from the other aircraft, we built an accurate picture of the search space. It gave instant situational awareness to the crew on the game plan. It also was sent across link 11 and 16 to the other players in the search. Link 4 can be used to guide the search aircraft onto contacts or to search location. Each aircraft brings special capabilities: night-vision goggles, infrared scopes, or the S-3 radar's periscope mode. The tools are there, make sure you know how to use them.

Keep it simple. Before we knew it, we had eight aircraft and two ships under our control for the search. Keeping the plan simple was paramount. Initially, no one could get a word in on the frequency, and our one controller was losing the bubble on where everyone was going. We split up the control and simplified the plan. We quickly regained full control of the situation and gave each aircraft a quadrant and altitude to work. The small boys were employed as lily pads to refuel our helos, so they could continue the search.

Who's in charge? Good command, control and communications is necessary for a long-range SAR. All players must be aware of the chain of com-

mand—it should be established during the SAR contingency brief. These command lines might blur, depending on the range of the SAR, the assets involved, and the scenario. In our case, after th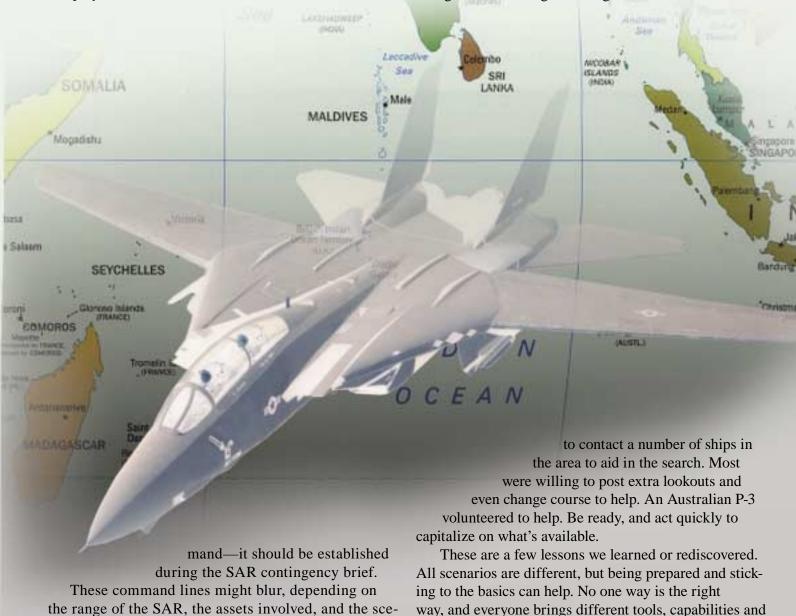e quick, initial search by the wingmen, there was no on-scene commander because no one was in the water, but the AMC quickly was designated (the E-2C), and our contact—the rescue

mission coordinator (RMC)—was identified on the carrier. It was necessary to reinforce this command relationship several times. Communications are critical to any SAR, and we had our share of communication problems. We just had fixed the split-control issue when it became obvious there were too many call signs and communications paths (UHF, JTIDS voice, SATCOM, even chat rooms) in use. Reducing the communications overload and following the chain of command improved the operation.

Use all your resources. An open-ocean search is a difficult task, but you're not always alone out there. Using maritime bridge-to-bridge, channel 16, allowed us to contact a number of ships in the area to aid in the search. Most were willing to post extra lookouts and even change course to help. An Australian P-3 volunteered to help. Be ready, and act quickly to capitalize on what's available.

These are a few lessons we learned or rediscovered. All scenarios are different, but being prepared and sticking to the basics can help. No one way is the right way, and everyone brings different tools, capabilities and experience. Conduct the search as safely as possible; don't complicate the situation.

LCdr. Laingen flew with VAW-116 and is currently assigned to the Airborne Early Warning Wing Pacific at Naval Base Ventura County.